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Original article

Deaccessioning of museum collections: What do we know and where do we stand in Europe?



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ABSTRACT

Deaccessioning – as practice entailing a physical relocation of an item with the consequence of making the item less accessible to its previous audience – is among the most controversial aspects of museum management. The disposal of items has traditionally been considered a violation of the museum's commitment to preservation and display, but a number of arguments have been advanced to point out its contribution to sustainability, efficiency, and even visitor welfare. As a result, deaccessioning has enjoyed increasing recognition both in academia and the professional world. Nevertheless, the consequences of abusing deaccessioning policies seem dire. Excessively liberal disposal policies may cause the dispersion of cultural heritage as well as managerial misconduct due to moral hazard. We review the arguments typically advanced in support and against deaccessioning and argue that, while considerable damage may result from its abuse, the benefits are compelling and regulations may be effectively employed to prevent pitfalls. In addition, we address the current situation of deaccessioning in Europe and argue that, while the subsidiary principle prevents the European Union from ruling in matters of national heritage, considerable interest exists among academics and professionals, resulting in a growing body of guidelines from national museal associations that present a degree of conformity to each other, and to the international codes of ethics.

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1. Research aims

The practice of deaccessioning presents substantial benefits for museums. Its abuse, however, threatens to irreversibly disperse cultural heritage and decrease public trust in museal institutions. With the present article, we aim to provide a comprehensive review of the reasons why deaccessioning policies may be powerful contributors to visitor welfare, and what are the boundaries they should not be allowed to cross. Furthermore, we intend to describe the state of the art of deaccessioning in Europe, indicating the principles that prevent the establishment of a supranational governing body, as well as the possibility to circumvent these obstacles through the adherence of individual museums to international codes of ethics. Our objective is to help reorganizing the academic debate and lay the foundations for future and better-informed research.

2. Introduction

Due to the economic recession, Europe is presently enduring efficiency and self-reliance is ever-increasing priorities for museal organisations. The pursuit of education, conservation, exhibition and research objectives has become a balancing act because of thinning resources [1]. In this scenario, the practice of deaccessioning is a particularly controversial issue for museum administrators [2–5], because deaccessioning policies are often considered undesirable, if not outright distasteful [6–8]. As a result, deaccessioning is often treated like the illegitimate daughter-practice of museum management theory, born from an affair with ordinary business administration: curators, directors and museum boards may be well aware of its existence, but they may sweep it under the carpet hoping the public does not notice.

Among such widespread furtivity, whenever a passing journalist or critic happens to detect something odd, e.g. in a museum's financial records, and asks questions to museum executives, the unconditioned response is to dissimulate as much as possible and gear up for the mediatic onslaught. An engaging example of this behavior is the 1972 Metropolitan Museum vs The New York Times controversy over the museum director's decision to deaccession

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several paintings, including a Redon, a Gauguin, a Manet, a Cezanne and an early Picasso [9]. As the audience is typically misinformed about deaccessioning issues, after mediatic storms, the public may be left with a sense of betrayal due to the impression that the primary responsibility of museums, the conservation of heritage, was violated [10]. This leaves an enduring scar in museums' reputation that is especially unfair because, as we will argue, deaccessioning may be unromantic and undemocratic, but it is necessary and it can be legally acceptable [11,12]. Indeed, museum directors were once obliged to cover up their disposals, e.g. by striking the deaccessioned items from museum records as if they had never been owned [13], but today, the propriety of deaccessioning policies as a legitimate and vital concern for museums is well established [14]. The accusatory attitude by the media may thus be unjustified, but on one hand, it may be grounded in the ambiguity of museum professionals themselves, who implicitly acknowledge the obscurity of their dealings when they choose to act furtively [15]. On the other hand, this attitude can also be imputed to a regrettable negligence of scholarly literature: while academia has sufficiently explained why deaccessioning exists [3,8,16] and presented some convincing case studies of it, contributing to organizational goals [6], it never clarified whether deaccessioning can be a solution to museums' long-documented problem of resource optimization [17]. Based on case studies, we may find deaccessioning successful as an ad hoc treatment, but it does not follow that it should be practiced regularly and extensively, as this can bear dire consequences. For example, it may unintentionally encourage museum administrators to view their depots as disposable reserves, or increase their liability to moral hazard and corruption, to the detriment of the entire museum world [18].

The objective of the present article is two-fold. First, we intend to recap state of the art knowledge of deaccessioning, including the reasons in support of the practice, its possible implications, the reservations commonly proposed against it, as well as objective difficulties in its systematic application. For this purpose, we draw from scholarly literature and practical experience and attempt a comprehensive framing of the issue through an accurate analysis of advantages and threats. As a second objective, we intend to review the current situation for deaccessioning in Europe. In doing so, we explain what can and cannot be done on a transnational level due to the subsidiarity principle, and we point out how the growing interest of the scholarly and professional worlds has partially compensated for the absence of legislative efforts. Our purpose is to ascertain whether deaccessioning is still an exotic danger for European museums or rather a phenomenon that is already present, at least in some countries, may benefit from Union-level regulation.

It is worth noting that our analysis assumes items subject to deaccessioning policies to present some degree of exclusivity. Specifically, for our present intents, deaccessioning entails a physical relocation of the item that makes it less accessible to its previous audience. As such, we address museums of tangible cultural heritage, such as art, science and material culture. This does not mean that deaccessioning is irrelevant for museums of intangible cultural heritage, e.g. ethno-anthropological museums, or that intangible heritage may not be subject to deaccessioning, but the arguments and analysis would need to be different. This limitation should be kept in mind while reading most of the argument we present.

The article is structured in six sections. After this introduction, we provide a brief explanation of what is deaccessioning through definitions and examples. Throughout the following two sections, we explore the arguments commonly advanced in support or against deaccessioning practices. Afterwards, we proceed to reviewing European policies towards deaccessioning and assess relevant international guidelines. Finally, we recap our main arguments, summarize our conclusions and propose avenues for further enquiry.

3. The need for a definition

As it is often the case for professional neologisms, with respect to deaccessioning, there is a surplus of “official” definitions. To navigate among them effectively, it is best to refer to the etymology of the word. In principle, the term “deaccessioning” describes the opposite of accessioning operations. These refer to the inscription of new items into the collection inventory. Therefore, deaccessioning originally refers to any removal of entries from said inventory. Because of this, it applies not only to sales but also to involuntary losses, such as thefts or misplacements, and accidental or deliberate destructions [19,20]. There is also a subtler kind of deaccessioning, knowledge of which rarely spreads beyond museum walls, whereby the items are removed from the register but never actually leave museum premises, as they are recycled as props for exhibitions, illustrative material for teaching programmes, or experimental material for conservators [10]. Given the manifold aspects of deaccessioning and the lack of a shared definition, scholars and professionals have occasionally opted to forge their own. For example, Byrne describes deaccessioning as the permanent removal of items from a museum's ownership and custody [21], thus, excluding disposals operated by non-museal institutions that may be in possession of museum-quality items, like city halls or universities. Crivellaro, instead, frames it as the permanent disposal of public property to the private sector [12], thereby, excluding sales or exchanges among public collections. These competing definitions contribute to the conceptual blurriness and make it difficult to dispel.

In addition to being an objective compass, the etymological roots of “deaccessioning” help us explore the considerable psychological undertones carried by the term. As noted by Mairesse, “accession” indicates the transfer of an item from one category to another [8]. Specifically, it constitutes an elevation from the mundane to the collection-worthy. This implies a net gain of status for the item. Accessioned objects enjoy a dignity that may be perceived as superior because they are effectively removed from the cycle of ordinary exploitation and invested with symbolic content, henceforth becoming vessels for higher meanings [22,23]. This process is distinctive of artwork in general, but within the museal context, it is further enriched with an institutional dimension. From an institutional viewpoint, accessioning works is an official mark of semiotic acknowledgement, infused with almost heroic ethos [3,24]. It is thus evident that deaccessioning can be viewed as the unceremonious revocation of previously conferred higher status. The word itself applies a negative prefix to a positive action, and thus bears undertones of degradation [3,8]. The choice to deaccession may suggest that an item is no longer worthy of display, at least in its current context, and is therefore returned to daily life exploitation, or converted to its monetary worth [25].

To aggravate this bias, it must be noted that the word “deaccessioning” is of English origin and does not easily translate into certain idioms, such as French, Spanish or Italian, despite ancient traditions of museology in these countries. The synonym “alienation” is often employed instead, which derives from Latin “alienatio”. This is originally a legal term signifying the cession of property or interest to someone else, but it also happens to indicate psychic dissociation, an estrangement of mind, and withdrawal of a person's affection from a subject of former attachment. Unsurprisingly, some of the countries where this language impediment exists are also those where cultural heritage is most fiercely defended as public property [26,27], and thus inalienable by definition.

This resistance to deaccessioning is typical of Southern European museums, as they belong to a distinctively conservative museological tradition. Indeed, a divide exists in Europe between the Anglo-Saxon and the Southern European, or Napoleonic, museum models. This is one of the aspects of the more fundamental

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